

## Vote for Iraq: Election Campaigning in Cyberspace

Baghdad, 25 December, 2008: A new blog site has been launched with the support of the International Election Assistance Team (IEAT) in Baghdad to encourage voters to participate in the country's nascent political process. The site is the newest addition to an innovative series of initiatives taking place in cyberspace to engage voters in discussion and motivate them to go to polls on January 31 next year.

The blog, called "Vote for Iraq" (انتخب لأجل العراق) can be found on: <http://voteiraq.maktoobblog.com>. It encourages users to use several formats – including photos – to express their views and enables links with other webs and online fora. The site has an editorial policy and is not moderated by any official institution or the United Nations.

"The IEAT has supported the development of this blog in recognition of the tremendous importance and potential of cyberspace to open up political discussion to everyone," says the Chief Technical Advisor of the IEAT, Sandra Mitchell. "If you look at elections around the world you'll realise that websites and blogs are critical spaces for engaging constructively with the 'spin' of official campaigns."

Online media has revolutionised the Iraqi public space by allowing for participation and instant feedback. In 2003 Iraq's most famous blogger, Salaam Pax, brought the realities of war to millions and revolutionised traditional newsrooms across the world. The loosening of editorial control enabled by technology has also created a shared identity and a sense of community which are also essential components of democracy.

Other online initiatives include UTube films showing Iraqi citizens explaining why they will be voting on January 31. The films, freely available online at <http://www.niqash.org/iraqvotes/>, can be adapted for TV, radio, sms and other formats while another website, <http://www.electionguides.org/> provides media professionals with a handbook on reporting elections in Arabic, Kurdish (Sorani and Kurmanji), Turkmen and Assyrian.

The United Nations led IEAT is working with Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to ensure that electoral events are managed according to international best practices of transparency and accountability. The media is an essential stakeholder in this process, and the online campaigns by civil society organisations complement more formal training and capacity building activities being carried out with the commission and with professional media organisations.

IHEC has recently formed an External Media Unit and has just launched a new website – <http://www.ihec.iq> – which contains a range of dynamic feedback features. The site is currently available in Arabic and English, but a Kurdish site will be coming online in 2009.

The front page of the site features a cartoon character, Abu Mutar, who is also found on the website of Aswat al-Iraq news agency (<http://ar.aswataliraq.info/>) and on the Yahoo.com index page of all Iraqis who have a yahoo.com email address. The character who will soon be joined by a wife, children and friends representing the broad spectrum of Iraqi voters, also appears on the traditional posters and billboards being erected by election officials in governorates across the country.